

Work as Therapy



Work Disability Prevention Information for Health Care Providers

A Changing Approach to Return to Work (RTW)

Work Disability Prevention (WDP) is based on the philosophy that work is an important part of recovery from illness or injury. It is a collaborative approach to ensuring that people remain connected to work, in a safe way, while they recover. The importance of good communication between a person with an illness/ injury, their workplace and their health care providers cannot be underestimated.

The presence of a medical condition does not necessarily create a functional or medical limitation that has an impact on the person's ability to do their job. Most patients will be able to do something at the workplace, even if it isn't their regular job duties. Employers are recognizing the importance of minimizing work disability and it is now common in the work place for employers to offer modified or transitional duties to help workers recover at work.

This approach means that the health needs of injured or ill workers can be addressed collaboratively and proactively, before the onset of excessive work disability, which research shows can be detrimental to a worker's overall health and wellness.

The scope of Work Disability Prevention is broad and encompasses everything from enabling a worker to stay at work following an injury or illness, and not miss any time at all, to accommodating workers who are unable to return to their pre-injury work, following an injury or illness.

Proactive prevention of work disability versus reactive responses can ensure minimal disruption in a workers' engagement and work productivity, workplace relationships, and workers' personal lives. In short, the RTW process as part of a patient's treatment plan becomes a form of therapy.

Work as Therapy

WDP programs are based on the philosophy that many patients can safely do some form of productive work during their recovery. In order for this approach to be effective, it's vital that patients understand and have confidence in the "work as therapy" philosophy. You can help by counselling your patients on the benefits and expected results of the RTW plan. It's important that they understand that this approach can benefit them physically, emotionally, and socially.

Health Care Provider's Role

Health Care Providers are important consultants in preventing work disability and supporting workers in their recovery. You play a vital role in setting the patient's expectations about work absence. As a health care provider you may be asked to participate in the stay at work or return to work process. Your role is to provide an expert, objective opinion on the biopsychosocial issues impacting return to work.

How to Prevent Unnecessary Work Disability

Communicate

Please help your patient in the work disability prevention process, understand what they can do safely. When your patient cannot return to work, please explain to everyone involved why this is the case. It's also helpful to identify when you believe the patient's condition will improve sufficiently to allow them to participate in a RTW plan. Best practice research supports that patients who remain at work or return to work early recover more quickly.

If you feel your patient requires a functional

assessment in order to assist in determining abilities, before a decision can be made, please let us know. We can arrange this.

Use work as an extension of treatment

Much like physical therapy or work conditioning or cognitive behaviour therapy, enabling recovering patients to participate in physically or psychologically suitable work can help them maintain their physical conditioning or improve their condition. It can also have significant psychosocial benefits for the patient and help maintain the employer/worker relationship.

Establish timelines

Establishing a timeline sets an expectation of recovery times and assists the employer in developing a safe and productive RTW plan for your patient. The two most important timelines are:

- The earliest date your patient can safely return to transitional duties
- The date your patient can safely resume his/her full duties.

Focus on abilities

An effective method for safe RTW is to focus on the your patient's abilities. If there are limitations or

restrictions not related to work injury/illness, please let us know. To safely assign work activities, a good description of physical or psychological restrictions is required. It's important that your patient understand what work duties can and cannot be safely performed. Employers are much more likely to identify suitable work when they consider the patient's abilities rather than restrictions.

RTW is Good Medicine

WCB PEI understands that you consider the whole person when providing opinions about whether your patient should return to work, when your patient should return to work, and under what conditions. In many cases, a modified RTW plan supports the physical, emotional and social well-being of your patient.



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Workers Compensation Board
14 Weymouth Street,
PO Box 757, Charlottetown, PE C1A 7L7
Tel: 1-800-237-5049 (toll free in Atlantic Canada)
902-368-5680
Fax: 902-368-5696
Website: www.wcb.pe.ca